Options for Researchers – planning for an academic career

Introduction
There’s no getting away from it: academia is a very competitive field with far fewer positions than well qualified, motivated doctoral graduates. Although the picture varies between disciplines, in general less than 50% of doctoral graduates are employed in academia 6 months after completion of their PhD and even fewer longer term. As with any competition, however, somebody has to win it! If you are thinking of a career in academia you need to be proactive in gathering as much information as you can and acting on it: find out what you need to do to make yourself more competitive and take control of your own development alongside your current research.

Is Academia For Me?
This is an important question to ask yourself! Talk to supervisors, colleagues and people in your network about the realities of the role of a lecturer and of working in Higher Education. Be honest with yourself about what you want from a career, what you are prepared to do to succeed and how well suited you are to the role as it really is rather than how you would like it to be.

The Researcher Development Framework (RDF) - provides a useful structure for assessing yourself against the knowledge, attributes and behaviour of successful academic researchers. www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf

An Academic Career – a fantastic resource for anyone interested in an academic career, whatever stage they are at. Self-assessment tools, video case-studies, comprehensive advice and resources. www.academiccareer.manchester.ac.uk

Academic Career Paths
Opportunities and career tracks post-PhD vary by discipline and country. In science and engineering it is common to take up one or more postdoctoral research positions – ‘postdoc’ - before applying for a permanent lectureship. In the humanities and social sciences there are fewer such research positions (often called Research Fellowships) so continuing with sessional teaching whilst also searching for research or lecturing posts is not uncommon. Find out more about academic career paths in your discipline:

www.leru.org/index.php/public/extra/careermapseurope - maps typical academic career paths in Europe
www.vitae.ac.uk/researcher-careers/researcher-career-stories - over 150 post-PhD career stories

Developing your Academic Profile
Although the balance of activities in academic roles can vary between disciplines, in general you will need to develop experience and expertise across 3 key areas in order to compete successfully for permanent roles: research, teaching and administration. Here are some suggestions for things you can do to actively build your profile alongside your current research:

Research
Academic selection committees are interested not only in your PhD or most recent piece of research but in whether you are developing a profile and credible future research plans that they will benefit from.

- Build your networks within the research community to get yourself and your ideas known, to find out about emerging hot topics in your field, and to gain ideas for future research / collaborations.
- Present your work at seminars and conferences www.conferencealerts.com
- Join relevant electronic mailing lists and online networks e.g. www.jiscmail.ac.uk
• Show you have the potential to secure funding by applying for small bursaries or travel grants, getting involved in joint grant applications with senior colleagues (more realistic in some disciplines than others) and familiarising yourself with future funding sources www.researchresearch.com

• If you’re interested in a career in the UK, understand how the REF works; think about how you will be able to demonstrate ‘impact’ for your research – www.ref.ac.uk www.brookes.ac.uk/research/ref-2021

• Publish! Access training and advice on where and how to target journals and publishers. Quality matters as much as quantity for academic recruiters – think ‘where’ as well as ‘what’.

Teaching
Although some permanent academic posts are ‘research only’, the vast majority carry teaching responsibilities. Balancing teaching commitments alongside your research can be difficult but it is worth the effort - although it’s important to know when to concentrate on simply finishing your PhD.

• Make it known to your supervisor and other staff in your department that you are interested in taking on some teaching. If module teaching isn’t available ask about other ways in which you can support student learning. You may be able to start with demonstrating or tutoring and work your way up to seminars and lectures.

• If you have already secured some teaching experience, think about broadening your range both in terms of teaching mode (seminars, lectures, online) and cohort (first years, final years, postgraduate). Ask about supervising undergraduate or postgraduate dissertations.

• Build your awareness of the full range of activity that goes into effective teaching and get involved if you can e.g. assessment, feedback, curriculum design, quality assurance, online learning.

• Find out about the teaching qualifications available through www.brookes.ac.uk/ocsld – the Postgraduate Certificate is a requirement or ‘Desirable’ for some permanent positions.

• If you’re struggling to get teaching in your department, be creative – volunteer a session for a Postgraduate Seminar Series at Brookes or elsewhere; approach Continuing Education departments to offer courses or evening classes in your area; contact other institutions where your expertise matches course content or use your wider networks (some sessional teaching opportunities are advertised on www.jobs.ac.uk); opportunities exist with schools and in the community - check out www.thebrilliantclub.org, which offers short paid placements to researchers to teach in schools.

• Keep up with developments in teaching in HE via www.timeshighereducation.com www.advancehe.ac.uk and https://wonkhe.com/

Administration
While not such a key priority as research and teaching in the early stages of your career, it can be helpful to build evidence of the administrative skills required of lecturers, but be careful how you allocate your time – make sure the benefits to your CV are not offset by time taken away from your research.

• Go to any departmental or faculty meetings you are entitled to attend

• Get involved in committee work e.g. as a Research Student Representative

• Get involved in organising a conference or seminar series

You can find out more in ‘Getting the First Lecturing Job’ (AGCAS, 2014). This is the report of a survey of 172 experienced academics across the different disciplines about their expectations of experience across the core areas of research, teaching and engagement when recruiting new lecturers.

Download the report at www.brookes.ac.uk/students/careers/researchers

Further Support at the Careers Centre See a Careers Consultant to talk through your career plans, get feedback on applications and receive practical training through the interview process, whether for an academic or non-academic role: www.brookes.ac.uk/careers

Reviewed: August 2019 Next Review: Summer 2020